

A developing power

Sunland-Tujunga's Home Depot victory shows the councils are beginning to reshape the way City Hall operates

By D.J. Waldie
August 19, 2007

LA.'s own "soft revolution" is, for the present, colored bright orange -- the color of Home Depot's nearly ubiquitous logo. By a 12-1 majority, the City Council last week took the highly unusual step of denying the desire of the home-improvement retailer to open a 93,000-square-foot store on Foothill Boulevard in Sunland-Tujunga.

Home Depot has spent an estimated \$600,000 in recent weeks on a hard-knuckle campaign to get a building permit for the new store in a renovated Kmart building. But the effort backfired badly when the company's tactical plan to pack the council chambers with orange T-shirted Home Depot "supporters" was published on the blog of community organizer Joe Barrett. Now the retailer will have to go through the city's environmental review process because construction work at the site was so extensive, a route the company sought to avoid.

City Hall players, trying to make sense of Home Depot's unexpected defeat, gave points to the opposition of a rival home improvement store, Do-It Center, down the street. But something else should be given credit -- a change in the rules of the local development game. I am not sure that all the players realize what has happened.

Neighborhood councils are the new players, with unknown strengths and weaknesses. Their behavior is not like the usual waltz around neighborhood concerns performed by some City Council members and developers with deep pockets and even deeper knowledge of campaign financing. And if the development game is to continue in Los Angeles as it has for decades, the effect of these new players has to be calculated -- and neutralized, if possible. That is what Home Depot sought to do and -- astonishingly -- failed to achieve.

Neighborhood councils might seem to be marginal players. They cannot coerce any of the other players; they can only advise. They cannot challenge the city in court, as angry homeowners associations often do, because neighborhood councils are city government. Last year, Controller Laura Chick's audit made the point that the councils function far too much like the rest of city government -- they lack fiscal resources, they tend to be overly factious and they do not seem to be especially effective when measured by the yardsticks usually applied to legislative bodies.

It is also true that the most successful opponents of past development projects have been local homeowners associations, whose members are often regarded as typical NIMBYists. That's now being said of homeowners who have launched a recall campaign against Westside Councilman Jack Weiss, claiming that his pro-developer sympathies are "Manhattanizing" Century City. Push-back from angry homeowners has a long history in Los Angeles, fueling the Valley secession movement in the 1990s, and that push-back will continue as the city becomes ever more dense and more urban.

Home Depot said last week that it was throwing in the towel. The sea of orange T-shirts seen at

previous hearings was missing in the council chambers. Despite the company's apparent concession, however, the environmental review the City Council ordered is not the shield that some community members might think it is, and it has not been much of a barrier to questionable development in the past (think of Playa Vista, for example). The traffic, environmental and other quality-of-life questions raised by the Sunland-Tujunga Neighborhood Council can be mitigated by the developer. So maybe the Sunland-Tujunga story is simply the same old, mostly ineffectual NIMBYism in a new dress . . . but that is not entirely true.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky recently told a gathering of neighborhood council leaders that development issues continue to define the future city and that the "gulf between what's happening at City Hall (on development issues) and what is happening in the community gets wider every day." City Planning Director Gail Goldberg, speaking at the same gathering, conceded that developers and some City Council insiders have gamed the development process for years to hike the value of projects through preferential zoning fixes. "In Los Angeles," she said, "the value of the land is not based on what the zone says. It's based on what the developer thinks he can have the zone changed to."

No news there.

But what is notable is that this kind of hard political talk -- the kind of talk once reserved only for real players in the development game -- is being heard by the volunteers and activists who make up the community of neighborhood council members. And when more than 700 Sunland-Tujunga residents, turned out by their neighborhood council and the office of Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, witnessed a badly confused North Valley Area Planning Commission approve a building permit for the Home Depot store by a 3-2 vote in mid-July, only to have the commission's approval slapped down by the City Council last week, another tipping point in the balance of power in Los Angeles was reached.

Some critics dismiss the neighborhood councils as containers for all the cranks in Los Angeles, but not everyone does. The neighborhood councils are growing up and still going through growing pains. They do not pretend to be examples of noble social action either. Flawed, partial and sometimes half-baked, neighborhood councils are a lot like us.

When the concept of neighborhood councils was made a pillar of City Charter reform in 1999, I wrote in these pages that councils are a "radical break with the city's past," which "would do the most to give Los Angeles a shared civic culture to replace the elitist one that has failed." I optimistically predicted that neighborhood council members "may even learn sufficient cunning to defeat the crowd of lobbyists who still make too many of the policy decisions downtown." Maybe they have learned.

I am an optimist. The neighborhood councils have not collectively won a decisive battle yet, but they did push back against proposed rate hikes by the Department of Water and Power early in their history, earning them their first success. The neighborhood council in Sunland-Tujunga has now become a real player. Two neighborhood councils in San Pedro are fighting for the same respect, and Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who represents the district, is lending them support in their resistance to Ponte Vista, a super-sized residential project on Western Avenue.

But I remain a skeptic too. The councils can be too neighborly toward the suburban status quo, unwilling to work with planners on better ways to fit denser residential development into existing neighborhoods because of parking, traffic and quality-of-life fears.

And there will always be gadflies and single-issue die-hards on neighborhood councils who will lull the unobservant into thinking that nothing of importance is going on when neighborhood councils meet. The pricey PR team for Home Depot could set them straight.

The undemocratic apparatus of L.A. growth had once been easy to manage. Developers, lobbyists and City Council members meshed their needs and interests in what has been a closed system that kept neighborhoods at a safe distance. But now there are these new players from nowhere places like San Pedro and Sunland-Tujunga, apparently transmitting power through the system, even though the neighborhood councils have no power of their own. Maybe our slowly unfolding regime change really can reanimate the dry husk of Los Angeles city government. That is what I hope.